DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release October 10, 1975 Levitt 202/343-5634

TRANSPLANTED WHOOPING CRANES BEGIN MIGRATION

As the first whooping crane departed its Idaho birthplace with its migrating forster sandhill parents this week, hopes soared that a second population of this rare species could be established in the wild as further insurance against extinction.

The six whooper juveniles, transplanted as eggs into nests of sandhill cranes in May at Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho, have been readily accepted by their "parents." They have spent the last six weeks close to their families, foraging for food, building strength and learning to fly in preparation for their flight south. It is expected that they will first fly to the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge in Colorado and by mid-November end up at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in central New Mexico, where these sandhills normally winter.

Each of the sandhill families selected to raise the whoopers was hand-picked because it summers and winters on national wildlife refuges and thus benefits from increased Federal protection. Biologists anticipate, but are not certain, the whoopers will do the same.

Of the 14 whooping crane eggs transplanted, nine hatched and six made it to flight stage. These birds probably would not have existed had the eggs not been removed from nests at the whooping crane breeding grounds in Canada's Northwest Territories. Whoopers usually lay and hatch two eggs in a nest, but one almost always dies because of sibling rivalry and competition for food.

(more)

These six whooping cranes, along with the eight hatched and raised this year by the 49-bird flock in Canada, represent the largest annual increase in whooping crane population ever recorded. However, biologists point out that both the wild flock's migration to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas and the transplanted birds' probable route to New Mexico are hazardous, and not all birds are expected to make it. Storms, food limitations, accidental shooting, disease, and predators are among the obstacles.

Even more significant than this year's increase in whooper population will be the lessons learned from the foster parent project. Scientists hope that the whooping cranes will adopt the sandhill migration pattern and, when mature in about five years, naturally select whooper mates. If this does happen and a second population of whooping cranes is established, it will be one of the most important techniques ever developed in the conservation of endangered species. Whatever the outcome, information gained in this experiment will serve as the basis for future decisions regarding restoration programs for whooping cranes and other endangered species.

Behavior of the adopted whoopers is the phenomenon scientists will be watching most closely, and a biologist under contract with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be migrating along with the whoopers so he can monitor this historic experiment. Dr. Rod Drewien of the University of Idaho Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit has studied both the whoopers and the sandhills extensively and will travel in a pickup truck south along the Rio Grande as the cranes fly overhead to Bosque del Apache. He will remain with the birds in New Mexico for the winter and then migrate back with them when they return to Idaho in the spring.

State wildlife officials along the expected migration route are standing by in case the whoopers touch down in their area. Mexican wildlife authorities have also been alerted in case the birds overfly the refuge in New Mexico and spend the winter in that country.

The current project is being jointly sponsored by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service and it may take many years to determine whether it is a complete success. In the meantime, a number of questions need answers. The juvenile whoopers are already larger than adult sandhills and their plumage has turned predominantly white. It is not known whether the smaller, gray-colored sandhills will continue to accept them. Neither are biologists certain that the whoopers will follow the same migration route once their foster parents "kick them out" during the next breeding season or migration north. Although there are considerable differences in the plumage, size, mating calls, and ritual dances of the two species, it is also not known if they will attempt to interbreed. If they do, they will be separated from the flock so that hybrids will not be produced.

As scientists continue studying the whoopers, hopes are high for these birds which have become symbolic of America's endangered species. And although the project is far from finished, everyone involved with it agrees--it was a very good year for whooping cranes.

x x x

INT: 1703-75

The Fish and Wildlife Service wants to establish a second breeding flock of whooping cranes in the wild like